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ABSTRACT

Blacks and other minorities have a more difficult time choosing and pursuing a career at mid-life than nonminorities. Lack of access to a wide range of career options is one problem. Minorities at mid-life may have a narrow view of the range of available jobs. A limited educational background is another problem. Most minorities interested in choosing, changing, or upgrading a career at midlife did not receive necessary training and experience in their early years. Lack of information about career options, lack of self-confidence in academic ability, lack of funds, and lack of adequate counseling all contribute to limited access to educational opportunities during mid-life. In order to help, counselors must make minorities more aware of counseling services which are available and would be beneficial to them. Counselors must have information about eduation and jobs, and be able to fit opportunities with client needs. One-to-one counseling is most effective with low-income clients. The use of tests in counseling must be carefully explained since many adults fear tests and lack test-taking skills. (NRB)

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CAREER COUNSELING FOR MINORITIES AT MID-LIFE:
Special Needs and Approaches

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Career Counseling for Minorities at Mid-Life
Special Needs and Approaches

Minorities, like nonminorities in our society, are constantly making career decisions during mid-life. If we consider mid-life to fall somewhere between the broad age range of 35-55, this is a period in which our career choices are examined. Some of us seek to advance in our present careers; others of us decide to change careers completely for a number of reasons; still others of us decide to embark upon a career for the first time. The extent to which adults are successful in their career development efforts depends upon a number of factors. The focus of this paper is the mid-life career development problems of minorities with special emphasis on blacks. Further, some strategies and/or approaches useful for counselors in alleviating these problems will be suggested.

Problems Affecting Career Development of Minorities

I believe it is safe to say without fear of contradiction that blacks and other minorities have a much more difficult time choosing and pursuing a career of their choice than nonminorities at mid-life. Several problems may account for this difficulty:

1. Lack of access to a wide range of career options. Minorities have traditionally been locked into selected careers; ones that are usually low-paying, low in prestige, most demanding physically, and less permanent than careers traditionally pursued by nonminorities. This phenomenon is due, in part, to discrimination in the market place. Consequently, minorities at mid-life today are likely to have a narrow view of the range of jobs available to them and certainly are not aware of the accessibility of those jobs.

2. Limited educational background. In choosing, changing, or upgrading a career at mid-life, minorities would probably not have had the necessary training and experience or even exposure in their early years that would enhance their career development pursuits. This is due again, in part, to the lack of accessibility of educational opportunities in early life. Then too, based on their early experiences, they are not likely to place as much value on education as a mechanism for upward mobility as nonminorities during mid-life. This phenomenon is reflected in the participation rate in adult education programs which shows that nonwhites participate at a much lower rate than whites.

3. Limited access to educational opportunities during mid-life. In addition to the lack of confidence in the value of education, minorities face yet another crucial problem; that is, the lack of access to educational opportunities. Limited access may be due to the lack of information about career options, lack of self-confidence in their ability to do academic work, lack of funds, and lack of adequate counseling.

These are some of the main problems with career development at mid-life for minorities as it exist today.

Possible Solutions

How can counselors and others in the helping professions such as adult educators, social workers, ministers, teachers, etc. impact upon the career development of minorities. Several approaches/strategies are suggested:

1. We must first recognize the problem and assert ourselves as helpers. This does not mean that we should develop a missionary mentality. It means that we must thoroughly reassess our practices and develop new and innovative

ways of attracting minorities to our services. Adults participate in programs, especially those in which they have a choice such as adult education, counseling, religion, on their own volition. We as counselors cannot sit back and blame them for not using our services. We must, on the contrary, become the initiator or aggressor by becoming aware of and sensitive to their problems. We must demonstrate that we are genuinely concerned with their career development problems and needs and are willing to help.

2. We must make our services known. The first step in the career development process is awareness. Often, minorities do not take advantage of services because (a) they are unaware of them, or (b) if they are aware, they do not believe the services are for them. To facilitate the awareness phase, several suggestions are offered:

- Don't continue to use traditional printed media forms to reach groups known to be least responsive to such media.
- Don't forget that every community contact by every member of your staff constitutes a part of your awareness and recruiting effort.
- Don't forget the importance of friends and family and former clients as sources of awareness.
- Don't just tell prospective clients what is available to them, show them why and how the service may be of assistance to them.
- Don't use educational jargon to advertise your services.
- Don't overlook the importance of becoming thoroughly familiar with the community you are trying to serve -- their lives, how they obtain information, whom they trust and talk to, etc.
- Don't overlook the necessity of collaborating with other agencies, organizations, and key individuals who already interact with the target audeince you are trying to reach.

3. We must be prepared to provide the kind of counseling needed, once minorities have come to us for help, that would enhance career options. Most minorities and/or low income persons recognize the need for education as a means of upward mobility. They, therefore, come to us to gain information about education and jobs. We must have this information readily available. We must also be able to fit opportunities with the needs of clients, which requires the ability to assess. Further, it is important to note that one to one couneling is crucial. Studies have shown that counseling services providing personal contacts should be overrepresented in low income areas, both because the interest in personal contact is greater among those with low educational attainment and because higher income groups prefer less labor-intensive mechanism for matching their interests with available resources. The following table illustrates this point.

Table I

Knowledge of and Desire for Advisement Services, by Educational Level

Education Level	Percent Knowing Location of Advisory and Information Sources	Percent Desiring to Discuss Adult Learning Activities with Someone
0-7 years	29	47
8-11 years	62	
12-15 years	75	37
16 or more years	92	27

Source: Western New York, 1976, pp. 113 and 121.

3. We must reassess our use of tests as an assessment device with minorities. Traditionally, the use of tests has been an important assessment tool of counselors. Whatever importance we attach to tests, it is significant to point out that adults, especially minorities, fear tests. And perhaps with reason. At least two reasons for this fear stand out: (a) they have a different cultural experience and tests are not usually reflective of that experience. Consequently, they do not do well; (b) they do not possess test-taking skills perhaps due to their lower level of educational attainment.

I believe, therefore, that counselors should use tests more for self-assessment purposes, i.e., allow minority clients to assess their own strengths and weaknesses rather than for placement purposes. Counselors should engage clients in a discussion of test results as these results relate to career choices. In this manner, I believe minorities will learn to fear tests a lot less and tests, in turn, will become more useful in the counseling relationship.

I have tried to present some of the problems of career development encountered by minorities during the middle years and offered some strategies that may be useful in improving our counseling strategies.

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